

Some Comments on Automatic Writing

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"Those who cannot remember the past
are condemned to repeat it"

—George Santayana (1911)

INTRODUCTION

The epigraph I have chosen for these comments seems particularly appropriate in considering the subject of automatic writing. Waves of popular enthusiasm for automatic writing occur in irregular cycles, and when they come, they often wash right over the general public and carry some of its members far out in waters beyond their depth. Those of us familiar with investigations of automatic writing sometimes watch these victims with dismay. We wish they would learn from the well-recorded but unassimilated experiences of other persons.

Judged by the apparent sales and uncritical acclaim in popular magazines of certain recent books derived from automatic writing (e.g., Anon., 1977; Montgomery, 1971; Smith, 1974), we appear to have entered another period of amnesic enthusiasm for it. Some readers apparently accept at face value the book-jacket blurbs and promotional material that boldly proclaim messages from discarnate persons. At the same time we also have, on the part of some other persons, a reaction against these extravagant pretensions that may sweep too much away. For example, a leaflet announcing a new book on parapsychology for the general public (Bowles and Hynds, with Maxwell, 1978) asserts that the authors of this book "distinguish laboratory-demonstrated phenomena (including telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis) from material popularly associated with psi but not scientifically demonstrated to have a connection (automatic writing, hauntings, . . . mediums, and the like)." This is going too far in the other direction. The authors, assuming they accept responsibility for the leaf-

¹ My thanks to J. G. Pratt and Carolee Werner, who gave me helpful suggestions for the improvement of this paper.

let advertising their book,² seem unaware that automatic writing and other forms of mediumship are conditions that in the past facilitated the occurrence of some of the best evidence we have for psi phenomena. I have written these comments in the hope of aiding readers interested in automatic writing to maintain a balance between the extremes of naive credulity and equally naive incredulity.

DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF AUTOMATIC WRITING

The term "automatic writing" is used to designate writing that is done without the writer being conscious of what he³ is writing, or even (occasionally) of the act of writing. Perhaps I should say "fully conscious" because automatic writers may have some awareness of what they are writing as they write. The activity appears to occur, however, without the subject's ordinary voluntary control and for this reason is called "automatic." Script produced automatically is apt to be rather larger than the subject's usual handwriting and also more cursive than ordinary writing generally is—that is, the letters (even of different words and sentences) may be joined together. In some cases the form or pattern of the writing may differ markedly from the subject's regular script. Usually the writing proceeds rapidly, sometimes far more so than the subject's normal writing does.

A person who writes automatically is usually in some altered state of consciousness. This may occur only to a mild degree, barely noticeable to other persons who are with the subject; or the subject's ordinary personality may be, or at least appear to be, totally absent, so that he does not respond if called by name. In the latter instance a quite different personality may seem to take over and implement the automatic writing. Some subjects report feeling as if someone else were actually holding the writing arm and doing the writing while the subject, like a mere spectator, remains passive and detached from what is happening.

Automatic writing, however, is only one way in which the contents of an altered personality, or a different personality, may manifest. The subject may speak what is in his mind, as occurs in ordinary cases of mental mediumship with oral utterances; or he may rest two or three fingers lightly on a pointer that moves around a board with letters printed on it: a ouija board. (A planchette is a somewhat similar device; it consists of a pencil mounted on small

² I have recently learned that the authors later withdrew this promotional leaflet.

³ The masculine pronoun is used for convenience here and elsewhere; it should be noted, however, that probably more women than men practice automatic writing.

wheels so that writing requires almost no physical effort.) One may ask what advantage writing gives over speaking for transmitting communications, whatever their origin. The answer is probably that writing somehow permits an easier "separation" of the ordinary self from the motor components of communication; one can detach oneself more readily from the actions of one's arm than from the actions of one's larynx, perhaps because the latter appears to be closer to the imagined locus of the self. In short, one can deny responsibility for the hand more easily than for the throat. (This idea of remoteness and freedom from responsibility is conveyed better by the older term "dissociation" than by the phrase "altered state of consciousness"; but the latter has the advantage of allowing us to consider a range of changes in awareness instead of only one condition that is either present or absent.) Similarly, hypnotized persons can often signal readily with movements of their fingers, while speaking is more difficult for them, and the act of speaking may tend to lighten a hypnotic trance. Some mediums (Mrs. Leonore Piper, for example) have been able to transmit communications both orally and in writing; others produce their communications exclusively in writing (Miss Geraldine Cummins) or in speech (Mrs. Osborne Leonard). (Because writing is just one method by which mediumistic communications can be transmitted, I shall, in what follows, sometimes allude to other types of such communications.)

The altered state of consciousness that usually occurs before and during the act of automatic writing facilitates the emergence into consciousness of material that is ordinarily kept outside awareness. The condition is thus somewhat like that of dreaming and also like that of a hypnotic trance. It is important to emphasize these similarities because some persons who acknowledge authorship of their own dreams, to which they attach no importance, think that whatever they express during automatic writing or hypnosis must indubitably come from some paranormal communication, usually from a discarnate personality or from the subject's own "previous life." They probably make this mistake because, although they are familiar with their dreams, automatic writing and hypnosis seem to them strange and externally imposed.

THE DIFFERENT SOURCES OF CONTENT IN AUTOMATIC WRITING

The content emerging and expressed during automatic writing (and related mediumistic or hypnotic states) has three possible origins: (a) material of normal provenance derived from what the subject has seen or heard (without necessarily being aware that this is the case); (b) information derived paranormally from living per-

sons or from printed or other inanimate sources; and (c) communications from discarnate personalities. If we are primarily interested in the third of these possibilities, it is our duty to exclude the first two. I will next comment briefly on each of these three sources of content.

With regard to information obtained through normal channels of communication, we should remember that our minds are stored—one could say stuffed—with much more information than we ordinarily need or ever become consciously aware of. Most of it has little or no value to us for our ordinary concerns, and it remains in the depots, so to speak, of the unconscious levels of our minds. But in altered states of consciousness, such as occur during automatic writing, the unconscious levels of the mind may deliver portions of this material so that it comes to the surface in written or oral utterances. The previously deposited information may emerge in unrelated or loosely associated fragments as it was originally filed; or it may appear transformed into remarkably integrated patterns of unusual beauty and insight that are beyond our ordinary capacities. Thus it happened that the numerous images of foreign lands and sea travel that Samuel Taylor Coleridge had put into his mind through wide reading on these topics came out of it again in the beautiful poems "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Lowes, 1927). The former is particularly appropriate to our present topic because Coleridge dreamed it in an altered state of consciousness—a sort of torpor induced by opium. He awoke with the poem still in his consciousness and began to write it down—automatically, we might say. He had written only 54 lines when a caller interrupted him. After the visitor left, Coleridge could no longer remember the rest of the poem and it was lost forever. Other poets have remarked that whole stanzas, and even entire poems, have sometimes floated into consciousness fully composed, so that all they had to do was write down what had already been assembled in the unconscious layers of their minds. Julia Ward Howe's poem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" came to her complete in this way (Howe, 1899). And the English poet A. E. Housman (1933) wrote a valuable account of how entire stanzas came into his consciousness fully (or nearly) assembled.

Persons who believe that their automatic writing comes from discarnate personalities sometimes assert that this must be so because the style of the writing—as well as the content—is far beyond their usual powers. One writer asked me to believe that what she wrote automatically *must* have had some source outside herself because it was written in blank verse. She should have known better. The unconscious mind can easily organize latent material into blank verse, and also, as the above examples show, into

rhymed verse. Some automatic writers also solemnly tell us that their products could not come from them because the writing pours out much more rapidly than their normal writing does. This is a grievously uninformed claim. The altered state of consciousness in which nearly all automatic writing occurs sets critical faculties in abeyance and thereby facilitates a much speedier flow of thought—and hence of writing—than can ordinarily occur.

Students of automatic writing and, most of all, automatic writers themselves should examine carefully the works of "Patience Worth" and the books about her (Litvag, 1972; Prince, 1929; Yost, 1925). "Patience Worth," through Mrs. Pearl Curran, wrote at high speed (mostly with a ouija board) much poetry and several novels that have considerable literary merit. These productions were far beyond the ordinary powers of Mrs. Curran. For this and other reasons, some observers regarded "Patience Worth" as a discarnate personality communicating through Mrs. Curran. This is not an unreasonable interpretation of the case; one of the greatest of psychical researchers, W. F. Prince (1929), thought it the best explanation for the case, although he remained clearly aware of alternative ones. Prince did not, however, persuade others of the correctness of the spiritist hypothesis in the case, and I think most students of it today consider it only an extraordinary instance of secondary personality. We have had no similar case of equal value since; and if doubts remain about the best interpretation for such an excellent case as that of "Patience Worth," this fact should make us unusually cautious in attributing a spiritist interpretation to other literary productions and philosophical teachings that come through automatic writing.

Automatic writing, like hypnosis, provides us with excellent examples of cryptomnesia, the emergence into consciousness of information normally acquired which the subject cannot remember learning. As an example of this process, the case of "Blanche Poynings" is surely one of the most instructive (Dickinson, 1911). She was a communicator through the (hypnotically induced) mediumship of a young English woman. "Blanche Poynings," presenting herself as a discarnate personality, gave many details about the life she claimed to have lived on the edge of the court of King Richard II. The subject denied ever having made a special study of the history of England in the late fourteenth century; and yet she showed an extraordinarily accurate knowledge of quite obscure details concerning it. Ultimately, and more or less accidentally, the subject herself revealed, when working a planchette, that as a child she had read a novel, *Countess Maud*, which contained almost all the verified facts included in "Blanche Poynings'" statements. The dramatized "Blanche Poynings" had gone beyond

the novel, however; the subject had developed and elaborated her character in a quite different manner from its representation in the book. Thus the communications contained accurate historical facts, which were included in a novel the subject had read; but they also contained embellishments contributed by the imagination of the subject's personality working below the level of ordinary consciousness. This last mentioned feature—that of the subconscious re-arrangement and decoration of previously assimilated information—deserves special attention. In the process of its formation, the production of "Blanche Poynings" closely resembled that of "Kubla Khan," although it showed a much lower level of creativity. There is also the additional difference that the factual ingredients of "Blanche Poynings" apparently derived from a single book, whereas the images Coleridge integrated in "Kubla Khan" had numerous sources.

Now I must note, not without emphasis, that the altered state of consciousness that permits the emergence of latent memories may also allow paranormally derived information to come to the surface. When this seems to happen we must always ask whether the subject might somehow have obtained the communicated information by normal means. Since the investigation of such claims does not differ from the familiar methods of investigating spontaneous cases in parapsychology, I shall not elaborate on it here.

THE COMMUNICATING PERSONALITIES

I mentioned above that during automatic writing, as during trance states with oral utterances, one or more personalities may seem to replace the subject's ordinary personality and communicate with us directly. These personalities usually claim to have been persons who lived on earth and died, and they may give more or less plausible accounts of terrestrial lives they say they have lived. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was common for spiritualists, and even for some psychical researchers, to accept these secondary personalities at face value. When penetrating questions were asked of them, however, most were unable to furnish satisfactory answers. In particular, it was often impossible to verify the details of the lives they claimed to have lived on earth. (This was the case even with several of Mrs. Piper's trance communicators [Sidgwick, 1915], despite her being justly regarded as the greatest American medium.) There seems no escape from the conclusion that the trance personalities of most mediums are secondary personalities of the mediums themselves. They thus resemble the secondary or multiple personalities manifesting in some mentally ill persons. In the late nineteenth century, psy-

chopathologists studied the origin of secondary personalities as "split off" aspects of the personalities of some mentally ill patients; this concept developed at about the same time that psychical researchers showed most mediums' communicators also to be secondary personalities.⁴ But resemblance does not mean similarity. In a number of important respects the controls of mediums differ from the secondary personalities of mentally ill persons. To mention just one important difference, the medium's controls (usually) manifest only when she wishes them to do so; the secondary personalities of patients appear without the bidding or desire of the primary personalities.

If, however, we believe that a medium's communicators have no independent status, does this mean that they have no paranormal powers? Not necessarily. Investigators realize that the altered state of consciousness that permits the staging of a new, but quite imaginary, personality is also one that aids the expression of extrasensory perception. Thus the secondary personality can be false and yet convey paranormal knowledge. It may even communicate paranormal knowledge strongly suggestive of the survival of some real discarnate personality. We can imagine that a real discarnate personality may lie behind and influence the utterances of a fictitious one constructed from ordinarily latent portions of the medium's personality (Hart, 1958; Stevenson, 1977). We can also suppose, with some evidence to support the idea, that a discarnate personality may combine with aspects of the medium's personality so as to form an ad-hoc compound personality. Hornell Hart (1958) proposed the term *persona* for such manifest communicators.

CRITERIA FOR INFERRING COMMUNICATION FROM A DISCARNATE PERSONALITY

If we cannot accept communicators at face value, how can we decide whether any ostensible communicator, through automatic writing or otherwise, has satisfactory credentials as a discarnate personality? Certainly the content alone can never satisfy our criteria, although many enthusiasts of automatic writing appear to think that it can. They may say that passages of such noble wisdom as they have produced must surely emanate, not from their own humble selves, but from some great Master who has chosen the

⁴ Automatic writing has been used in the exploration of certain psychopathological states. Psychotherapists sometimes deliberately encourage patients to write automatically in order to obtain access to forgotten stressful experiences that may have contributed to current symptoms. For examples of this use of automatic writing, see Beck (1936-37), Erickson and Kubie (1939), Mühl (1930/1964), and M. Prince (1914).

unworthy writer as a conduit. It is, however, unlikely that any moral teachings can excel those of Jesus Christ or the Buddha; and it is no less unlikely that any automatic writer has not been exposed to the teachings of at least one of these. Edifying messages have their value, no doubt, but not as indices of anything paranormal, much less a discarnate communicator.

Nor can we take paranormal cognitive information alone as evidence that a particular communication has come from a discarnate personality; we still do not know the limits to the transmission of cognitive information among living persons by extrasensory perception. All communicated cognitive information—that is, knowledge *about* something—is vulnerable to the interpretation that the sensitive or medium might have obtained it paranormally from living persons or from printed or other sources. This interpretation is known as the super-ESP hypothesis (Gauld, 1961). It attributes vast powers to mediums and other sensitives, powers much greater than anything so far demonstrated in parapsychological laboratories. Nevertheless, some persons *may* have unlimited powers of extrasensory perception, at least for the acquisition of cognitive information, and I think we should allow for this possibility in our interpretations.⁵

It is possible, however, that not all types of information are transmissible by extrasensory perception. C. J. Ducasse (1962), who was a well-informed and disciplined student of the evidence suggesting survival of human personality after death, argued that although knowledge *about* something could be transmitted by extrasensory perception, knowledge of *how to do* something could not be. He was referring to skills, such as the skill of speaking a foreign language, or that of using one's own language in a characteristic style. This distinction was developed at great length by the philosopher of science Michael Polanyi (1958, 1962, 1966), who, however, did not consider the relevance of his arguments to parapsychology; Polanyi asserted that skills are incommunicable in any way. If he is right—and I think he is—then skills cannot be communicated paranormally.

I mentioned *style* above. The French naturalist de Buffon said: "The style is the man himself." Promoters of some automatic writings wish us to believe they have been given messages by some famous deceased person; but they ignore or minimize vast differences between the style of the real person and that of the automatic writings attributed to him. An example of this is the

⁵ Readers interested in the strengths and weaknesses of the super-ESP hypothesis may consult a discussion of this subject that I have published elsewhere (Stevenson, 1977).

claim of one automatic writer to have produced messages from the great American psychologist William James (Smith, 1974). James happened to possess one of the most felicitous, and least imitable, styles of any writer of English. If the vapid writings that Smith attributes to William James did indeed emanate from him, I can only say that this implies a terrible post-mortem reduction of personal capacities. (Survival of death with such an appalling decay of personality makes it, at least to me, a rather unattractive prospect.) Smith has disarmingly acknowledged a great difference between the style of the living William James and his supposed communications through her; but with the style gone, what remains to convince us of the communicator's identity?

I think we have obtained evidence in a few mediumistic communications of the persistence of a particular style after death. Ducasse (1962) cited the "Lethe" case (Lodge, 1911) as evidence of the survival of F.W.H. Myers. Ducasse thought the various communications involved in this case showed evidence of both the classical scholarship and the particular interests that Myers had. In short it reproduced Myers' style, using that word not just in its narrow literary sense, but in reference to a person's idiosyncrasies of mental contents and expression. Drayton Thomas (1945) published another example—that of a communication through Mrs. Osborne Leonard purporting to come from Sir Oliver Lodge. He found in it many instances of particular habits of phrasing and of the use of favorite words that Lodge had shown when living. Thomas counted the occurrences of these peculiarities in the communication through Mrs. Leonard and compared these with a count of the same items in a speech delivered by Lodge during his lifetime. The frequencies of the different idioms in the two passages were remarkably similar. The evidence in this communication through Mrs. Leonard of a reproduction of Lodge's style has made me more inclined to take seriously the interesting *content* that it contains.

It is not, however, easy to say whether a medium has exactly reproduced a writer's or an artist's style or has only given us a close imitation of it. This problem has confronted investigators of the musical compositions of Mrs. Rosemary Brown, who claims to write down new compositions dictated to her by great composers, such as Beethoven and Liszt. Some musicians have found themselves willing to believe that this really happens; others have suspended judgment, or have said that Rosemary Brown's compositions merely imitate the less successful compositions of the composers from whom she says her music comes (Heywood, 1971).

The difficulty of making judgments about style in mediumistic composition has been shown also in claims of communication from

the novelist Charles Dickens. When he died he left an unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Later, an American medium, T. P. James, claimed that Dickens, having survived death, had dictated the concluding sections of the novel to him. Opinions differed concerning the similarity between James' automatic writings purportedly from Dickens and the style of Dickens' known writings (Fodor, 1933). E. F. Kelly (1972) has suggested that debates such as these could be based on stronger evidence, and perhaps even conclusively settled, by a computerized comparison of the occurrence of particular words and phrases in an author's known writings with their occurrence in communications said to come from him after his death.

Mrs. Leonard had known Sir Oliver Lodge for many years, and T. P. James had certainly read Dickens; so we must suppose that they had assimilated—perhaps quite unconsciously—at least some of the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the living men. Stronger evidence comes from instances in which the medium never met or knew about the communicator when the latter was alive.

Some of my remarks above may have led some readers to think that all the automatic writings of an individual writer would derive *either* from information acquired normally; *or* through processes of extrasensory perception from living persons or printed sources of information; *or* from discarnate persons, these also communicating with the medium through extrasensory processes. We should not forget, however, the possibility that the same medium or sensitive may give us messages now from one source and now from another.

I have studied one case of this type, in which the sensitive used a ouija board. A friend regularly sat with this sensitive and also had her hands on the ouija board's pointer. I later found that some of the communications almost exactly reproduced death notices from a newspaper which this friend would have seen (without necessarily being aware that she had seen them) as she did the newspaper's crossword puzzle. In this newspaper the obituaries were printed on the same page as the crossword puzzle, and adjoining it, so that in working the puzzle she would inevitably have the obituaries within her visual field even if she did not read them consciously. There was no question of dishonesty, so far as I could tell, but it seems most likely that the sensitive's friend (unconsciously) guided the pointer to deliver the information she had picked up (also unconsciously) from glancing at the newspaper obituaries. But other communications from the woman whom I identify as the principal sensitive could not have occurred in this way, or through any other normal means of transmission that I could identify or conjecture; they seemed to require at least extrasensory perception as an

explanation. And still others (although only a very few), because they contained complex items of information that it seemed most unlikely the sensitive could have obtained from any single living person or other single source, made me favor communication from a discarnate personality as the best explanation for them.

We must also remember the possibility that any single communication may contain a mixture of several ingredients: subliminal rubbish; information culled from garrulous sitters; items obtained by delving paranormally into the minds of sitters and their absent friends; dramatic productions displaying the imaginative powers of the medium; and—rarely—communications from discarnate personalities. The credulous exploit the last possibility while forgetting that the onus of proof is on the medium or the person claiming to have received a communication from a discarnate personality. It will not do to say something like: "I know most of what I have written is worth little and may come from me; but some of it comes from someone else." We have a right to ask for the evidence that "someone else" had a hand in the production.

Some uncritical enthusiasts of automatic writings know that other persons have doubts about the source of their productions. They know that parapsychologists, and many skeptical laymen also, question the claims of most trance personalities to be discarnate persons. Yet they want to believe, and want others to believe, that *their* communicators are different, that they are really discarnate persons communicating through them. Such automatic writers may adopt one or both of two tactics to work around the flanks of skepticism. The first is to avoid the issue of identity and represent the trance personality as some lofty personage whose real identity is best concealed behind a pseudonym. Thus we had "Rector" and "Imperator" of Stainton Moses (Fodor, 1933; Moses, 1912), later transferred to Mrs. Piper.⁶ In more recent years we have had "the Brothers" and a variety of Tibetan Masters. Resort may also be had to impersonal appellations, such as "The Source," from which, we are asked to believe, an ordinarily inaccessible wisdom flows down to us. The second tactic is to belittle as petty quibbling all questions about the identity of the Great Teacher. It should be enough, we are told, for us to enjoy the privilege of sitting at the

⁶ This allusion may seem unfair without some qualification. Stainton Moses and Mrs. Piper did not themselves (in their normal states) say that the pseudonyms "Rector" and "Imperator" concealed the identities of exalted discarnate personalities. Their communicators, however, did say or imply this. Whatever the explanation for the use of pseudonyms for these communicators, a baffling failure to provide evidence for their identity remained. Yet evidence of identity was provided for other communicators through Mrs. Piper, such as "G.P." (Hodgson, 1898).

Teacher's feet—if not in person, then figuratively—by reading his uplifting and instructive messages. To doubt is to prove our unworthiness to receive the benefits offered.

I am not so easily cowed. For me, identity is an essential aspect of the credentials that justify respect for what someone says, whether that someone is living or dead. Accurate identification seems particularly important when we are asked to believe that what appears to be utter nonsense is in fact some ineffable wisdom because a Great Teacher is said to have given it to us. How are we to know that it really has come from the attributed source? But the problem of identity is no less important when the communications are not foolish, but instead appear to make good sense. If they contain some new wisdom—or even old wisdom restated—we should want to know who the teacher is before we accept his instructions. The teachings of Jesus and of the Buddha have had enormous influence, largely because the lives they led exemplified what they taught. Since their lives as well as their teachings are on record for us to follow and imitate as best we can, I want to know the identity of anyone presuming to repeat or improve upon them.

This point seems so important to me that I shall develop it further. Let us imagine that I am presented with some script attributed to a communicator who prefers to use the pseudonym "Dr. Charisma," thus modestly concealing the real identity of a personality so august that we could not believe ourselves entitled to learn from him. Suppose further that "Dr. Charisma's" communications are utterly banal and contain nothing new. Even though old truths often bear repeating, I have no particular reason to prefer "Dr. Charisma's" restatement of them over those put on record by or for some person known to have lived on earth. Suppose then that, against all odds, "Dr. Charisma" does say something new. My appraisal of it would depend on my assessment of whether he is likely to know what he is talking about. I prefer to learn my physics from physicists, my medicine from doctors, and my better conduct from saints. Have I no right to evaluate what a person says—living or dead as he may be—with a full knowledge of his qualifications? I want to know not just who he claims to be, but the evidence supporting his claim. A communicator should not say that he is a chemist, much less a saint, if he cannot show that he was one, and this means proof of identity. I do not believe that death confers wisdom automatically any more than life does; there is no reason to lower our standards of excellence for the dead any more than for the living.

I am far from claiming that I have said anything new in the preceding paragraph. A short quotation from Myers (1889) will show that I am merely rephrasing an old complaint. Referring to

the failure of most spiritualists to interest themselves in evidence, he wrote:

There is constant assertion that proofs of identity can be obtained by patience and care; but actual proofs—or even attempts at proof—are hardly ever forthcoming. Yet, without these, what reality is there in disquisitions on doctrine—in lengthy "revelations" without any kind of guarantee? (p. 546).

SOME HAZARDS OF AUTOMATIC WRITING

I shall now refer briefly to the hazards of automatic writing. Some persons have warned dabblers in automatic writing about the serious dangers of engaging in it. Depending upon their point of view, they variously suggest that automatic writers risk either being possessed by discarnate personalities or being taken over by secondary personalities. It appears that the second of these fears, if not the first, is by no means groundless. Some instances are on record of persons who have practiced automatic writing and have later been unable to disengage from the evoked secondary personalities or to stop the writing. They have seemingly been forced to write when they did not wish to do so (Bender, 1958–59; Cayce, 1964; Earle and Theye, 1968; Edwards, 1968). When automatic writing becomes compulsive writing the person concerned should try to stop immediately. Discomfort, uneasiness, or fear accompanying the practice of automatic writing are also important signs that it should be stopped.

The complication of compulsive writing occurs often enough so that it should be known about as a possible development of automatic writing. Most persons who develop compulsive automatic writing recover quite quickly; but rarely the addiction or ostensible possession lasts for years, as in the well-known case of Staudenmaier (Ahlenstiel, 1964; Oesterreich, 1966).

Concerning the possibility that an automatic writer might become possessed by a discarnate personality I can only say that I know of no instance where this has been shown conclusively to have happened. Perhaps the most impressive reported case that suggests the possibility of such a development is one of the two cases of paranoia reported by Prince (1927). In this case a man (called Mr. Tyrrell by Prince) came to believe himself possessed by a deceased person (called Murray by Prince), whom Tyrrell had known and who had become inimical toward Tyrrell before he died. Tyrrell had not been an habitual automatic writer, but Murray communicated by means of automatic writing that Tyrrell performed. Prince handled the case as if Murray was in fact a discarnate spirit possessing Tyrrell, and persuaded him to leave Tyrrell alone. Prince's

intervention was followed by Tyrrell's recovery. This, however, is not evidence that the communicator identified as Murray was the same person as the living Murray whom Tyrrell had known. Tyrrell might have been "possessed" by his idea of Murray; in short, he might have been deluded. Prince cautiously referred to the case as one of "paranoia." On the other hand, possession by a discarnate personality cannot be considered an implausible interpretation of the case.

Although I have drawn attention to unpleasant complications of automatic writing, I do not mean to imply that these occur frequently. I believe that they do not. And certainly we should remember that many mediums, including some of the greatest (such as Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Willett, and Miss Geraldine Cummins), practiced automatic writing over many years without any impairment of health or self-control.

I must next discuss another hazard of automatic writing, that of self-deception. When an automatic writer has convinced himself that he really is receiving messages from a distinguished discarnate personality, he may think it his duty to make these teachings available to less fortunate persons. (There is nothing incompatible between this motive and making a small fortune out of the sales of books of automatically written messages!) And the flow of such "teachings" is not likely to stop so long as the writer remains ignorant of the history of this subject; he can deceive the public unintentionally, and profitably, so long as he continues to deceive himself. I am tempted to enlarge on the theme of willful ignorance, by which I mean ignorance that a person maintains when he knows that he could learn more, but chooses not to do so. This is a harmless failing if it does not affect other people, but a more serious matter when it involves the beliefs and pocketbooks of others.

The majority of automatic writers remain obscure, as do their writings; they do not try to find a publisher or do not succeed if they try. At least when this happens they are saved from the vice of exploiting other persons' credulity. Other motives may maintain the automatic writing, sometimes for years. The thought of being again in touch with a loved person who has died may stimulate some automatic writers; for others the idea of receiving the personal guidance of a notable person has attractive features. But perhaps the most subtle motive is the vanity of thinking that one has been selected to spread a new revelation. Unfortunately, persons with this mission, if they have enough ignorance and enough self-confidence, can attract a following and initiate a cult—for a time. But sooner or later truth and common sense set in, and the followers turn, like disillusioned voters, to the next great promise.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FURTHER STUDIES OF AUTOMATIC WRITING

I wish, however, to end on a positive note. We would not have to sift the grains from the chaff of automatic writing if there had never been any grains in it. There is never a counterfeit without an original of value. Much of the best mediumistic evidence for survival has come from the automatic writings of such mediums as Mrs. Piper (Hodgson, 1898), Mrs. Verrall (Piddington, 1908), Mrs. Willett (Lodge, 1911), and Miss Cummins (1965). Most modern automatic writers have probably never heard of these mediums, much less studied their communications or the lengthy investigations of their mediumship recorded by the Societies for Psychical Research. Some parapsychologists, incidentally, appear to have a similar gap in their understanding of the subject. Martin Ebon (1976), administering a gentle rebuke to modern parapsychologists, expressed puzzlement about why they take so little interest in such an important topic, altogether apart from the fact that it was the subject of extensive investigations by one of the greatest of their predecessors (Myers, 1884, 1885, 1887, 1889).

We should certainly continue the search for other automatic writers as gifted as some of the mediums I have mentioned. The hope of some day finding one keeps me studying the subject. And I see no reason why interested persons should not try to develop themselves as automatic writers if they feel so inclined.⁷ I only remind them that they will be helped, not hindered, by informing themselves about the scientific investigations of automatic writing. We do not need to abandon automatic writing; we just need to stop adopting extreme positions about it, such as attributing all of its products to psychopathology or all of them to discarnate personalities. If we maintain the high critical standards of the best of our predecessors, we may yet obtain from automatic writing evidence of survival after death that improves on what they published.

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⁷ Here I recommend the valuable autobiographical account that Mrs. Verrall (1906) wrote about the development of her automatic writing.

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Effect of Response Bias on Psi Mediation

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ABSTRACT: It has been previously shown that, in an experiment where ESP occurs, bias against a particular response increases the probability that, when the response is made, it will be correct. This is because a decrease in the number of calls of a symbol increases the ratio of total hits (ESP hits plus chance hits) to calls on the symbol. However, correctness of response (indicated by the hit/call ratio) is not the same as psi mediation (indicated by the hit-deviation/target ratio). In all six experimental series analyzed by the author, the hit-deviation/target ratio was greater with the most frequent response than with the least frequent response, indicating a greater facility of ESP expression with the pro-bias response. In three of these six series, the greater degree of psi mediation was sufficient to cause this response also to be more correct than the anti-bias response.

On the basis of the results of several ESP experiments, Stanford (1967) formulated a response-bias hypothesis which states that if ESP occurs in an experiment, bias against a particular response increases the probability that, when it is made, the response will be correct. This is based on the fact that a decrease in the calls of a symbol increases the ratio of total hits (ESP hits plus chance hits) to calls on the symbol, and thereby increases the proportion of calls of the symbol that are correct.

To illustrate, with a closed deck where there is one ESP hit on a given symbol out of 10 calls of the five targets of that symbol, the probable total number of hits on that symbol is $2\frac{1}{2}$. The value of $2\frac{1}{2}$ is obtained from one ESP call of that symbol plus (9 non-ESP calls of that symbol \times $4/24$). The value of $4/24$ is the probability of a non-ESP call of that symbol being a hit, since four of the 24 remaining targets are of that symbol. If the number of calls of the symbol is decreased from 10 to five and the number of ESP hits on the five targets of that symbol remains at one, the probable total number of hits on that symbol is decreased to $1\frac{2}{3}$. The value of $1\frac{2}{3}$ is obtained from one ESP call of that symbol plus (4 non-ESP calls of that symbol \times $4/24$). From this it can be seen that, although a decrease in the number of calls of a symbol from 10 to five decreases the probable number of hits on that symbol from $2\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{2}{3}$, it increases the hit/call ratio from $2\frac{1}{2}/10$ to $1\frac{2}{3}/5$; i.e., from